

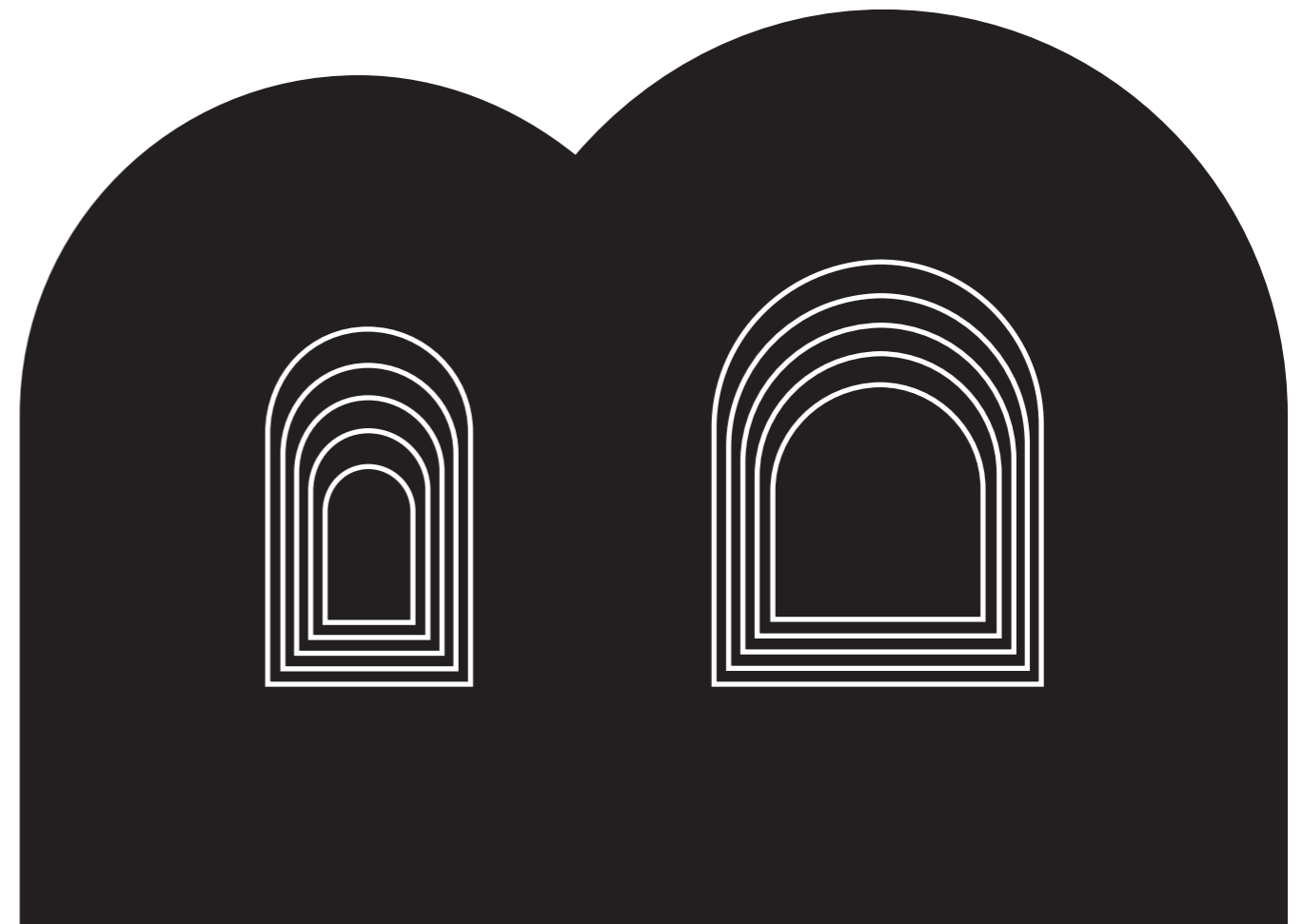


OLD GUARD
A plaster version of a terra-cotta warrior adorns the wall of a restaurant in Nanluoguxiang, one of Beijing's oldest neighborhoods.

BACKSTREET BEIJING

Nanluoguxiang, an ancient lane in the heart of the Chinese capital, has emerged as an atmospheric hub for dining, barhopping, and shopping. But can the *hutong's* historic spirit survive its present-day popularity?

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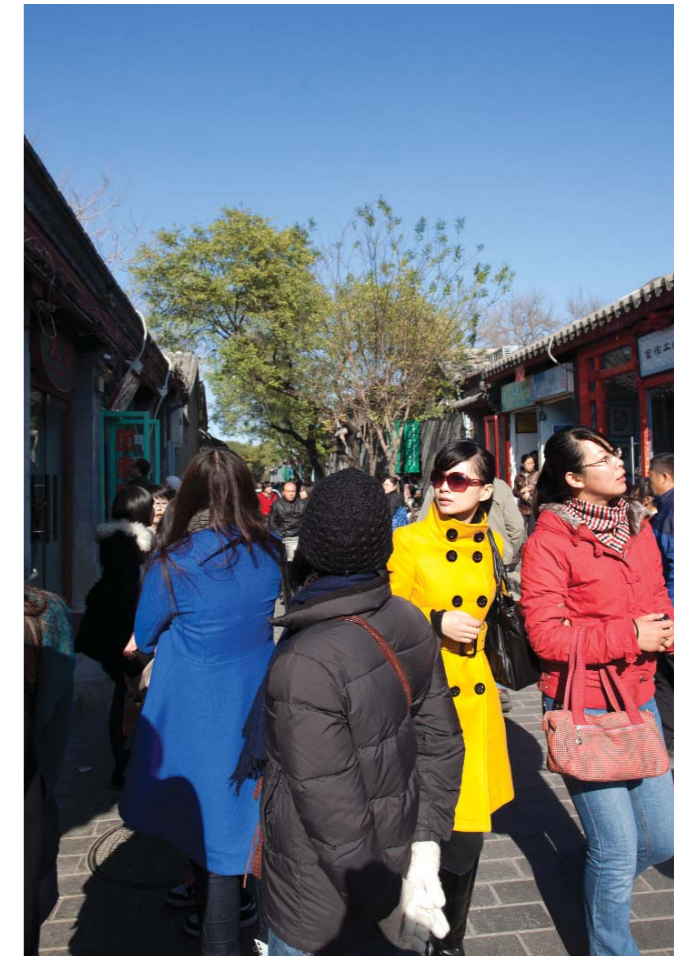


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ERCHED ATOP A FLYING PIGEON BICYCLE, a decade or so ago, one could cross central Beijing and rarely spot a car, a high-rise, or any other reminder of the advent of the 21st century. Traveling by *hutong*, as the narrow alleys in the city's ancient core are called, you'd roll along mesmerizing medieval lanes, past steamshrouded noodle stalls and clusters of old-timers chatting over rounds of mah-jongg. Men hooked birdcages in trees and crowded around card tables, while housewives hung laundry or sorted through vegetables. Every so often, a coal cart would wheel by. Savoring such scenes in the shade of gnarled trees or some centuries-old temple, you could easily forget where or—more beguilingly—when you were.

This was before Beijing won its bid to host the 2008 Olympics and embarked upon a frenzy of demolition and redevelopment. Some observers estimate that 90 percent of old Beijing is now gone, or soon will be; what hutongs remain are clogged by cars, construction, and cranes. This only serves to heighten the joy of being able to stroll down Nanluoguxiang, one of Beijing's oldest—and hippest—laneways.

Dating to the Yuan Dynasty, when the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan made Beijing his capital, Nanluoguxiang (pronounced "nahn loo-ah goo shiyang") can look back on more than 700 years of history. Situated north of the Forbidden City near the landmark Bell and Drum towers, it's also just east of Houhai Lake, once a docking site for boats ferrying goods up the Grand Canal to the imperial palace. Houhai's parklike environs also served as a playground for the local elite, who built grand mansions and beautiful gardens along the lakeshore.



Nanluoguxiang itself was originally home to the minstrels, artists, poets, and puppeteers who entertained the Beijing gentry; make a detour down any of the eight side alleys that earned Nanluoguxiang such colorful monikers as Centipede Lane or Fishbone Street, and you can still stumble across an array of venerable theaters. By the time of the Qing dynasty, the area had become home to generals and government ministers, with many still-extant houses boasting carved brickwork, grand doorways, and stone lions. Resident luminaries in the 20th century included painter Qi Baishi and literary icon Mao Dun. When my wife



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CHANGING LANES

Clockwise from above: Saturday crowds on Nanluoguxiang, an increasingly popular destination for locals and visitors alike; yogurt shops are the latest fad in the area; overlooking the neighborhood's clay-tiled rooftops. Opposite: Xiao Bian'r at his Pass By Bar.



STYLE TO SPARE

Left, from top: Inside the lobby of the Duge hotel, which occupies a traditional courtyard residence on a side lane off Nanluoguxiang; local hipsters. Opposite: The retro Sandglass Café on Mao-er Hutong was one of the first coffeehouses to open in the neighborhood.

and I first moved to Beijing on a six-month contract in 1990, we were also fortunate enough to live here.

For all its history, Nanluoguxiang wasn't even on most maps until five or six years ago. Now, it's Beijing's most celebrated stretch of boutiques and cafés, with an array of pubs and even small hotels tucked into former courtyard houses. Yet the surrounding hutongs still offer visitors a rich glimpse of an old Beijing that is fast disappearing.

Kicking off Nanluoguxiang's transformation was the Pass By Bar, an unassuming hangout that wouldn't have attracted much attention in Kathmandu or Khao San Road. But in Beijing a dozen years ago it seemed downright revolutionary, with photos of Tibet on the walls and travel books targeting China's new bohemians. Nearby, Plastered T-shirts created clever alternatives to the standard "I Climbed the Great Wall" souvenir shirts. The street soon became a magnet for creative talent, sprouting teahouses, cafés, and shops catering to foreign visitors and resident hipsters.

While some complain that overdevelopment and commercialization is ruining the hutong's authenticity, others argue that despite its present-day bustle, Nanluoguxiang has remained true to its historic roots. Says local guidebook author Eric Braahamsen, "The area first became a commercial hotspot in Yuan times. Then it became the site of teahouses and shops selling luxury goods from southern China. So interestingly, it probably had a fairly similar character centuries ago as it does today."

Indeed, Nanluoguxiang is one of China's rare preservation success stories; in 2009, *Time* magazine included it on a list of "25 Authentic Asian Experiences." But the question is, for how long? Already there are signs that it is becoming a victim of its own success.

Businesses report staggering rental hikes, sometimes 500 percent. Already, this has forced many pioneering establishments to relocate, like Indian restaurant Mirch Masala and chip shop Fish Nation. Next could be *Saveurs de Corée*. The name reflects the time Hong Konger Chow King-tai spent in Montreal, where he met his Korean wife. After moving to Beijing in 2005, the couple spent nearly US\$40,000 to convert a grimy Nanluoguxiang fuse factory into a chic two-story Korean eatery. As the neighborhood has blossomed, Chow finds himself in a battle with his landlord, who wants to quadruple the rent. "I'm just shocked to see so many of the people who built this district being forced out," says Chow, who is scouting new locations elsewhere in town.

"Landlords have gotten greedy," says Plastered's outspoken British owner, Dominic Johnson-Hill, who has lived in Beijing since the early 1990s. An unofficial ambassador for Nanluoguxiang, Johnson-Hill is a regular on local talk shows, where he laments the neighborhood's descent into crass commercialism. "What made this special were the unique creative talents that came here," he tells me. "As rents go up and cool shops are forced out, I worry that Nanluoguxiang will wind up like any other part of Beijing, with all the same crap."

The founder of the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center (CHP), He Shuanzhong, has similar concerns, and not just about Nanluoguxiang. "One problem is the government's 'World City' concept. Beijing and Shanghai both had this idea to destroy all the old quarters and make new buildings." Developments like Xintiandi, which remade an old Shanghai neighborhood of *shikumen* ("stone gate") houses into a trendy shopping and nightlife area, emphasized the commercial potential of historical property, He says. "Now, they think, you can save some





parts of the old city, but only if they have cafés or bars. Otherwise, there's no value; it's just old."

The CHP office is on Fangjia Hutong, a lane that is itself undergoing a Nanluoguxiang-like transformation, with old buildings becoming art houses, boutiques, and cafés.

"Cultural heritage needs to be real and living," He adds. As a worst-case example, he points to Qianmen, a perverse nightmare for preservation advocates. A historic neighborhood south of Tiananmen Square, it was razed, then rebuilt like a theme park of China at the turn of the

last century, complete with a fake tram. "That's a complete failure," He tells me with disgust. "They totally destroyed the cultural heritage of the area. Nobody lives there now, the businesses are empty. It doesn't even look historic."

According to Michael Meyer, author of *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, central Beijing had 7,000 hutongs in 1949. By 2005, the number was only 1,300. "I think Beijing will take its place alongside other great world capitals—London, Moscow, Paris, Rome—and have uninhabited, sterile architectural museums and a pocket of inhabited, lively communities that will attract tourists looking for the 'real' Beijing," Meyer says. "It's a pity that the city could not forge a new, uniquely Chinese solution to preserving its neighborhoods."

Then there is the question of whether Beijingers even want to save the old neighborhoods. Last autumn, the CHP screened two documentaries about the modernization of Beijing. Both featured interviews with hutong evictees who proudly showed off shopping facilities in their new apartments, as well as previously unimaginable amenities like indoor plumbing and microwaves. Even those stubbornly remaining in areas earmarked for redevelopment seemed less concerned about the loss of traditional community than they did about ramping up their compensation packages.

Still, local preservationists find encouragement in rare victories, like the recent suspension of alarming plans to raze the hutongs around the Drum Tower. The CHP spearheaded opposition to the US\$735 million scheme, which would have built shopping malls and underground parking in a well-preserved Ming-era neighborhood.

"The government needs to look carefully at each building, and appreciate how these neighborhoods grew organically, house by house," He says. "Beijing doesn't realize what treasures it has. I hope it's not all lost before they do."

IF YOU WANT TO GAIN A SENSE of the magnificence of Beijing centuries ago, head to the Forbidden City. You can bike along the ancient walls, and then follow the moat around the watchtowers. Parks, lakes, and island pagodas are all visible along an ancient axis that aligned important structures with the former imperial palace. To the south is the Temple of Heaven, and due north, my destination on a recent outing, are the bewitching Bell and Drum towers, which, in the era before clocks, served as the court's timepiece.

This was a bleak route when I first visited Beijing in the winter of 1990. Beijing's wide boulevards were virtually

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New threats to Nanluoguxiang emerge all the time. Wrecking crews are razing old houses at two locations along Ping'an Dadao. One site will become a maze of gated communities; the other will host a subway station

PASSING THE TIME

Clockwise from above: Hanging out at the Pass By Bar, where walls are covered with photos from the owner's trips to Tibet; mah-jongg is a pastime for Nanluoguxiang's old-timers; Nanluoguxiang on a quiet day. Opposite: The courtyard at the Duge hotel.



BEIJING

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carless then, and the intersections were filled not with Mercedes sedans, but with thousands of bikes and carts, some motorized, others pulled by horses or even oxen. In the hutongs, mounds of cabbages were piled to the roofs of stone-cold houses, providing the only color in the grim grayness of the coal-stoked city.

Now, the same roads are bursting with cars, color, and tourist shops. Buses disgorge visitors in identical baseball caps, tailing bullhorn-bleating leaders on pilgrimages to one mock recreation of Old Beijing after another. Doorways are draped with kitschy souvenirs: panda hats, blue Haibaos (the Gumby-like mascot of the recent Shanghai Expo), and Chinese caps with dangling Manchu hair braids.

Eluding touts, I pedal north to Ping'an Dadao ("Peace Big Boulevard"), itself renovated a decade ago when the government decreed that it should serve as the new main street of Old Beijing. Old courtyard houses were razed, replaced by three-story imitations that to this day remain empty.

Turning onto Nanluoguxiang proper, I head up to my old street, Ju'er Hutong, where I lived in 1990. Back then, foreigners weren't permitted to reside within the Old City limits, though this single lane was an exception. Several long-term expats, including writers like Peter Hessler, lived here. They became the first customers of early neighborhood establishments like the Pass By Bar.

The Pass By's owners, Xiao Bian'r and Hai Yan, embody Nanluoguxiang's unique spirit. Xiao Bian'r (he's been called that for so long, he sometimes forgets it's a nickname—"Long Hair") is an artist who has done design work for outfitters like Black Diamond and Patagonia. He's also a keen adventurer; the striking photos hanging in his bar are from bike trips he's taken annually to every part of Tibet.

Hai Yan, whom he married in 1998, a year before they opened the Pass By, says they were drawn to Nanluoguxiang because it was the rare Beijing neighborhood where young Chinese and foreigners could freely meet. As their business grew, they moved to a bigger location nearby. Some T-shirts printed for friends spawned a gift shop. Neither of them

ever thought of becoming an institution.

"We opened the bar mainly as a place for our friends to hang out. Everything else came naturally," Hai says. "We never had a plan."

That laid-back approach provided the DNA for the rebirth of Nanluoguxiang. "It started as a celebration of Old China from the foreigner's point of view," says Johnson-Hill. "The location was good and we all worked to keep it from turning into another bar street, so all the businesses were distinct. We hated how the crowds and all the loud bars destroyed the Houhai area."

New shops and old prospered gradually side by side. "That was a good time, when the foreigners first started coming," recalls Mrs. Liu, who has sold yogurt from a grocery store for as long as anyone can seem to remember. "Back then, we liked to watch the visitors. Now it's different. Everyone comes to drink, not to enjoy the street."

She adds, "Most of the original residents have left, too. Housing has gotten so expensive. I have mixed feelings. It's still interesting—people come from all over. But it's so noisy and messy now."

Several merchants have pulled together to form a local chamber of commerce. "We want to regulate what kind of businesses come in," says Xu Yan, head of the group, and owner of Taste restaurant. A committee would decide whether businesses had an original approach befitting the character of the street. "This is the oldest hutong in the world. Everyone comes to Beijing to see its history." He is confident the character and quality of Nanluoguxiang can be maintained. "This is a cultural relic. It's like a pearl necklace; if every store is good, it will be a beautiful necklace. If one is bad, that necklace will be ruined."

Still, new threats to Nanluoguxiang emerge all the time. Wrecking crews are razing old houses at two locations along Ping'an Dadao. One site is destined to become a maze of gated communities—multimillion-dollar recreations of hutong homes for the city's newly rich. The other will host a subway station.

Can Nanluoguxiang's offbeat spirit survive? Pedaling around my old neighborhood, I marvel how, even amid the daily throngs of tourists, I can duck down a familiar lane and find that little has changed. Around the Bell and Drum towers, kites fill the sky and card tables and chestnut stands draw crowds. After the tourist rickshaws and tourists depart, the square fills with dancing, as it has for decades. Yet, outside my former home on Jue'er, I see piles of sand and cement. And across the street, the venerable Youth Child Theater advertises a production of *Zombie Park*.



THE DETAILS NANLUOGUXIANG

—WHERE TO STAY Duge Courtyard Boutique Hotel

The best of Beijing's hutong hotels is located 50 meters off Nanluoguxiang. It occupies a traditional courtyard property, with 10 themed guest rooms done up with shimmering designer interiors. 26 Qianyuanensi Hutong; 86-10/6406-0686; dugecourt.com; doubles from US\$241.

—WHERE TO EAT Saveurs de Corée

Looking to relocate, this small, chic Korean eatery is for now one of the best in Nanluoguxiang, with a romantic rooftop terrace that is perfect for people watching. 29 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/6401-6083.

Tapas Cafe & Red Ding Coffee

Great nibbles and good selection of Beijing-style cuisine, set in an atmospheric courtyard. 149 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/8401-8856.

Sandglass Café

This pint-size café—one of the area's oldest—delivers retro charm and great coffee amid a room filled with old books, curios, and antique

furniture. 1 Mao'er Hutong; 86-10/6402-3529.

—WHERE TO DRINK

Pass By Bar The one that started it all.

66 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/6402-5086.

Cambulac A hutong hideaway off the main strip, with a serene courtyard setting and a fantastic selection of wines. 32 Beixiang Hutong; 86-10/6402-7707.

12sqm Talk about truth in advertising: this 12 square-meter establishment could be the smallest bar in Beijing, but lacks nothing in style.

1 Fuxiang Hutong; 86-10/6402-1554.

Guitar Bar Like something out of *Wayne's World*, this long-popular haunt features banks of speakers and mixers. Who cares if the musical enthusiasm exceeds the actual talent? 40 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/6405-7263.

—WHERE TO SHOP

Plastered T-shirts

Stocked with scores of clever, colorful, quirky slogan shirts and accessories.

61 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/6407-8425.

Letian Pottery Club

Popular with locals and tourists alike, you can buy or make your own pottery and ceramics. 23 Nanluoguxiang; 86-10/6401-3799.

Navel Original if off-the-wall streetwear by designers Gao Wenzhe and Li Ning. 53 Nanluoguxiang; 86-132/4142-9407.

"The environment has really changed," sighs the Pass By's Hai Yan. "Before, it was more like friends; we knew everyone, and talked all the time. Now, the customers are mostly tourists. Nanluoguxiang has become a tourist attraction."

Glumly, she surveys her bar. All the tables are full, and there's a line out the door. Most business owners would be ecstatic, but not Hai Yan. "I just hope we can hold on to what was special about Nanluoguxiang." ☺